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Soviets Seeking To Displace U.S. At South Pole

In a development that gives literal meaning to the phrase "cold war," President Reagan's intelligence advisers have warned that the Soviet Union may take the top position at the bottom of the world.

A classified report, now under review by the National Security Council, warns that the United States is in danger of losing its leading role at the South Pole, just when decades of investment might begin to pay off.

If the United States loses its foothold in Antarctica by default, it would be a historical irony, a reversal of the way we acquired Alaska in 1867 from a Russian government that couldn't see the potential value of that inhospitable icebox.

In 1959, the 12 nations with interest in Antarctica signed a treaty that suspended territorial claims for 30 years and reserved the continent for peaceful research. The treaty has been observed scrupulously ever since, probably because no nation thought a scientific laboratory in the world's most hostile environment was worth quarreling over.

But that attitude has changed

now. In recent years, the scientific research, mostly by Americans and Russians acting independently, has revealed that there's a lot more to Antarctica than penguins and paralyzing cold. The continent could be another Alaska in the value of its natural resources.

For example, Antarctica has been found to have huge beds of krill, a shrimplike species that may well be the world's richest marine protein resource, an important consideration for a country like the Soviet Union, whose agriculture routinely fails to meet the demands of its huge population.

Antarctica also is known to have oil under all that ice; some experts suspect it has more than Alaska. And scientific studies indicate that minerals are abundant.

My associate Dale Van Atta, just back from Antarctica, has seen top-secret CIA and National Security Agency reports and an exhaustive review by a 14-agency Antarctic Policy Group. These documents note that the Soviet presence on the frozen continent has increased greatly in recent years. The Russians now have eight bases in Antarctica to our four, though the U.S. scientists are still ahead of the Soviets in research.

Part of the U.S. preeminence is due to the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station, the American base that sits right on the spot where six nations' territorial claims meet. But the policy group expressed concern that

the U.S. presence will diminish, despite the longstanding presidential order that the United States will maintain an "active and influential presence" in Antarctica.

"Continuing decline of the U.S. presence and level of effort in Antarctica will force the abandonment of the prestigious South Pole station to probable occupation by the U.S.S.R.," the group has warned.

The ease with which the Russians could take over the South Pole if we abandon it was made clear in February, 1981, when a Soviet aircraft—an IL14 equipped with skis—flew 12 Soviet scientists from their base at Druzhnaya and landed at the U.S. base. This and other developments, the policy group warned, may have given the Russians a new "mobility, flexibility and reach."